

August Wilhelm Schlegel, Excerpt from *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1808)

Abstract

August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845), like his brother Friedrich and wife Caroline Schelling, was a key member of the Jena circle of intellectuals. Schlegel made groundbreaking studies of Sanskrit, even producing a translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He was also a respected teacher and critic. In this excerpt from his lectures on dramatic art and literature (1808), Schlegel provides his “Outlook on the Future,” focusing on German national character and its expression in artistic forms.

Source

[...]

What path shall we now enter? Shall we endeavour to accustom ourselves again to the French form of Tragedy, which has been so long banished? Repeated experience of it has proved that, however modified in the translation and representation, for even in the hands of a Goethe or a Schiller some modification is indispensable, it can never be very successful.

The genuine imitation of Greek Tragedy has far more affinity to our national ways of thinking; but it is beyond the comprehension of the multitude, and, like the contemplation of ancient statues, can never be more than an acquired artistic enjoyment for a few highly cultivated minds.

In Comedy, Lessing has already pointed out the difficulty of introducing national manners which are not provincial, inasmuch as with us the tone of social life is not modelled after a common central standard. If we wish pure comedies, I would strongly recommend the use of rhyme; with the more artificial form they might, perhaps, gradually assume also a peculiarity of substance.

To me, however, it appears that this is not the most urgent want: let us first bring to perfection the serious and higher species, in a manner worthy of the German character. Nowhere, it appears to me, that our taste inclines altogether to the romantic. What most attracts the multitude in our half-sentimental, half-humorous dramas, which one moment transport us to Peru, and the next to Kamschatka, and soon after into the times of chivalry, while the sentiments are all modern and lachrymose, is invariably a certain sprinkling of the romantic, which we recognize even in the most insipid magical operas. The true significance of this species was lost with us before it was properly found; the fancy has passed with the inventors of such chimeras, and the views of the plays are sometimes wiser than those of their authors. In a hundred play-bills the name “romantic” is profaned, by being lavished on rude and monstrous abortions; let us therefore be permitted to elevate it, by criticism and history, again to its true import. We have lately endeavoured in many ways to revive the remains of our old national poetry. These may afford the poet a foundation for the wonderful festival-play; but the most dignified species of the romantic is the historical.

In this field the most glorious laurels may yet be reaped by dramatic poets who are willing to emulate Goethe and Schiller. Only let our historical drama be in reality and thoroughly national; let it not attach itself to the life and adventures of single knights and petty princes, who exercised no influence on the fortunes of the whole nation. Let it, at the same time, be truly historical, drawn from a profound knowledge, and transporting us back to the great olden time. In this mirror let the poet enable us to see,

while we take deep shame to ourselves for what we are, what the Germans were in former times, and what they must again be. Let him impress it strongly on our hearts, that, if we do not consider the lessons of history better than we have hitherto done, we Germans – we, formerly the greatest and most illustrious nation of Europe, whose freely-elected prince was willingly acknowledged the head of all Christendom – are in danger of disappearing altogether from the list of independent nations. The higher ranks, by their predilection for foreign manners, by their fondness for exotic literature, which, transplanted from its natural climate into hot-houses, can only yield a miserable fruit, have long alienated themselves from the body of the people; still longer, even for three centuries, at least, has internal dissension wasted our noblest energies in civil wars, whose ruinous consequences are now first beginning to disclose themselves. May all who have an opportunity of influencing the public mind exert themselves to extinguish at last the old misunderstandings, and to rally, as round a consecrated banner, all the well-disposed objects of reverence, which, unfortunately, have been too long deserted, but by faithful attachment to which our forefathers acquired so much happiness and renown, and to let them feel their indestructible unity as Germans! What a glorious picture is furnished by our history, from the most remote times, the wars with the Romans, down to the establishment of the German Empire! Then the chivalrous and brilliant era of the House of Hohenstaufen! and lastly, of greater political importance, and more nearly concerning ourselves, the House of Hapsburg, with its many princes and heroes. What a field for a poet, who, like Shakespeare, could discern the poetical aspect of the great events of the world! But, alas, so little interest do we Germans take in events truly important to our nation, that its greatest achievements still lack even a fitting historical record.

Source: Augustus William Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*. Translated by John Black, Esq., revised, according to the last German edition, by the Rev. A. J. W. Morrison, M.A. London, 1846, pp. 527–29.

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